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The effect of mixed planning on the fluency and complexity of EFL learners' writing performance

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Abstract

This study set out to explore the effect of planning conditions on Iranian EFL learners' written task performance regarding fluency and complexity. Forty five intermediate learners were selected out of a population of 90 TEFL learners on the basis of their scores on the proficiency test. Participants of this study were randomly assigned to three groups: pre task planning (PTP), on-line planning (OLP), and simultaneous pre and on-line planning (POLP) groups. A Decision-making task was used for data collection. The results revealed that pre task planning resulted in greater fluency. unpressured on-line (OLP) planning had statistically significant effect neither on syntactic complexity nor on written fluency, and the opportunity to engage the learners simultaneously in per- task and no-line planning (POLP) enhanced the fluency and complexity of their written performance significantly.

Keywords: Task, Pre task planning, On-line planning, Fluency, Complexity

1. Introduction

In recent years a number of researchers, syllabus designers, and educational innovators have called for a move in language teaching toward task –based language teaching (TBLT) approaches to instruction (e.g., Prabhu, 1987; Nunan, 1989; Long & Crooks, 1991; Ellis, 2003). These approaches are somewhat disparate, but they share a common idea: giving learners tasks to transact, rather than items to learn, provides an environment which best promotes the natural language learning process. According to Skehan (1998) TBLT approaches have three pedagogic goals, namely fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Ellis (2005) argues that one of the external factors that have major effect on the emergence of the three aspects of performance is planning. Planning is a metacognitive strategy which influences the kind of language that learners produce and is an inseparable part of spoken and written language use. That is all speakers and writers need to decide what to say and write and how to do it (Ellis, 2005). Planning and its role in task-based performance are of both theoretical interest to SLA researchers and of practical significance to language teachers. In the case of SLA researchers, planning is important because it links in with the current interest in the role of attention in language learning. In the case of teachers, its significance lies in the fact that planning is a relatively strait forward way of influencing the kind of language that learners produce.

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Therefore, a number of studies have investigated the effect of planning on learners oral performance (Ellis, 1987; Foster and Skehan, 1996; Yuan and Ellis, 2003). These studies showed that giving learners, opportunity to plan a

task resulted in significant gains in both fluency and complexity. However, these studies produced mixed results when the focus was on accuracy. Although applied linguistics have come to recognize the importance of writing in its own right as well as its complexity, writing remains of the least understood subjects in applied linguistics (Silva & Matsude, 2002). Despite, the number of studies has been conducted about planning and the consensus reached by researchers about its effect on oral performance but there has been little research about the effects of mixed form of planning on written performance of learners. This study aimed to ascertain the effects of pre and on-line planning and mixed form of these two types on writing performance of learners in terms of discourse- analytic measures of fluency and complexity.

1.1 Planning

Ellis (2005) identifies the principal types of planning, which seems based on general acceptance. Planning can be catalogued into two kinds: pre-task planning and within task planning. Pre task planning includes rehearsal and strategic planning, rehearsal refers to the fact that students are given a chance to perform the task before the actual performance of the task. It involves task repetition as the first time performance is viewed as preparation of what the content is and how the content is expressed for the task. Within task planning divided into pressured or unpressured. In unpressured planning students can have a careful plan on their performance of a task. In pressured planning they need to rapidly repair their performance. Theoretical underpinnings of planning studies are information processing models which constitute the dominant approach to theorizing about language comprehension and production. Generally information processing theories claim that human beings possess a limited capacity. That is, they find it difficult to perform more than a single task at one time, especially if the knowledge and skills required to perform the tasks have not been automatized (Skehan, 1996; Vanpatten, 2002). It was proposed that provision of planning time would unpack some of the real time processing load incurred on L2 learners which gives them time to concentrate more on their performance during on-line execution of the task and promoting quality of performance. Information processing models are commonly those proposed by Levelt's (1989) speech production model and Kellogg's (1996) model of writing in planning time studies. Levelt's model contains three principal processing components namely conceptualization, formulation, and articulation, which corresponds to three stages which are involved in Kellogg's model of writing. Planning, i.e., the writer establish goals for writing and corresponds conceptualization, translation, i.e., the writer select the lexical and syntactic frames for encoding ideas, is equivalent to Levelt's formulation, and Kellogg's execution, i.e., translation is converted into production, is equivalent to articulation Ellis (2005). According to Ellis these models provide basis for considering the component of spoken and written language production that learners focus on while planning.

2. Methodology

The research undertaken is designed to investigate the impact of planning conditions on written task performance. To achieve the purpose of the study the following research questions were formulated.

2.1 Research questions

1. Does pre-task planning (PTP) improve the complexity of Iranian EFL learner's writing performance?
2. Does on-line planning (OLP) improve the complexity of Iranian EFL learner's writing performance?
3. Does simultaneous pre-and in line planning (POLP) improve the complexity of Iranian EFL learner's writing performance?
4. Does pre-task planning (PTP) improve the fluency of Iranian EFL learner's writing performance?
5. Does on-line planning (OLP) improve the fluency of Iranian EFL learner's writing performance?
6. Does simultaneous pre-and in line planning (POLP) improve the fluency of Iranian EFL learner's writing performance?

2.2 Research hypothesis

1. Pre-task planning, on-line planning, and simultaneous pre and on-line planning don't lead to complex written performance.
2. Pre-task planning, on-line planning, and simultaneous pre and on-line planning don't lead to fluent written performance.

2.3 Participants

Participants of the study were 45 male and female learners studying English at a University, whose age ranged from 22 to 27. They selected among 90 EFL learners based on their scores on proficiency test. All of them had a bilingual background, i.e., Turkish and Persian, and all were at intermediate level and had already passed two writing courses. They randomly assigned to three groups of 15 which were labelled as the pre task planning (PTP) group, on-line planning group (OLP), and simultaneous pre and on-line planning group (POLP).

2.4 Design

A quasi-experimental design with three levels of planning including, Pre task planning, on-line planning, and pre and on-line planning with three groups consisting of 15 participants in each and different time constraints for written task performance for each group. The dependent variables in this study were fluency and complexity of task-based written performance in decision making task type and independent variables were the three types of planning including pre task planning (PTP) on-line planning (OLP), and simultaneous pre and on-line planning (POLP).

2.5 Setting and Procedure

This study was carried out with 45 homogenous EFL learners majoring in English language teaching in an EFL situation. The participants randomly assigned to three groups based on their proficiency test scores. These three groups were labelled as pre task planning (PTP), on-line planning (OLP), and pre-and on-line planning (POLP) groups. The data was collected for each of the three groups during normal class time. In the pre task planning (PTP) condition, the participants were given a piece of paper to write notes during the pre task planning time which was set at 10 minutes in the study. The provision of 10 minutes planning time was based on previous research (Foster & Skehan, 1996 ; Yuan & Ellis, 2004), no detailed instruction was given to the participants. Upon the completion of 10 minutes of pre task planning time, the notes were removed. According to Yuan and Ellis (2004), the removal of written notes serves dual purposes: first, it ensures that language generated during task completion is produced within the specific time limit. Second, the notes can be used as evidence regarding how individual students undertook the planning. In OLP condition, the participants were required to begin writing immediately; they were under no pressure to finish the task quickly. The reason was to ensure that participants had ample time to engage in on-line planning (formulation and monitoring) during task completion. The researcher noted the time the participant spent on task to check that this was longer than the time taken by PTP group. Finally, in POLP condition, the participants were given the same task and also they were given 10 minutes planning time before beginning to write and after 10 minutes they were asked to write immediately but this time they had unlimited time for writing like OLP group.

2.6 Measures

2.6.1 Fluency measure (Number of syllables per minute)

Fluency was measured through the syllables per minutes, i.e., the total number of syllables produced divided by the total number of minutes participants took to complete the task (Yuan & Ellis 2004).

2.6.2 Complexity (Syntactic complexity)

The total number of clauses in each text was calculated and divided to total number of T-units (Yuan & Ellis, 2004).

1. Results

In order find how independent variables affect the dependent variables, the raw scores of the participants were fed into the computer software SPSS for data analysis. For data analysis a series of one-way ANOVA and Independent Sample t-test was used to find out the impact of planning on performance.

In order to examine the effect of different planning conditions on fluency and complexity One-way ANOVA was run. Table 1 demonstrates significant difference in fluency and complexity mean of three groups. POLP group produced more fluent and complex written texts than the others.

Table 1.Descriptive statistics, and ANOVA results for the effects of three planning condition on fluency and complexity

Measures	Time	Planning conditions	Mean	Std. Deviation	ANOVA	
					F	Sig
Fluency	15	PTP	6.5740	1.57847	21.511	.000
	20	OLP	3.2767	.69382		
	23	POLP	5.1880	1.66169		
		Total	5.0129	1.92183		
Syntactic complexity	15	PTP	2.7600	.64977	6.184	.004
	20	OLP	2.3807	.44297		
	23	POLP	3.2160	.80901		
		Total	2.7856	.72408		

ANOVA results in Table 1 indicate that the three planning condition affected fluency and complexity of learners performance. The difference among groups concerning fluency is meaningful. ($F=21.51$ $P=.000$ $P<.05$). As Table 1 indicates the difference among groups concerning complexity is also significant ($F=6.18$ $P=.004$ $P<.05$).

Based on the LSD test result on Table 2 we can realize that the difference among three groups, PTP, OLP, POLP, with 15, 20, 23 minutes time concerning fluency is significant ($p<.05$) but in terms of complexity this difference is meaningful between two groups OLP and POLP. ($p<.05$) .So the first hypothesis proves regarding pre –task planning condition and rejects the second hypothesis.

Table 2.LSD test results for the effects of three planning condition on fluency and complexity

TIME(I)	TIME(J)	Mean Difference(I-J)	Std. Error	Sig	Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Fluency	15 20	3.2973*	.50483	.000	2.2785	4.3161
	23	1.3860*	.50483	.009	.3672	2.4048

	20	15	-3.2973*	.50483	.000	-4.3161	-2.2785
		23	-1.9113*	.50483	.000	-2.9301	-.8925
	23	15	-1.3860*	.50483	.009	-2.4048	-.3672
		20	1.9113*	.50483	.000	.8925	2.9301
Syntactic complexity		20	.3793	.23785	.118	-.1007	.8593
	15	23	-.4560	.23785	.062	-.9360	.0240
	20	15	-.3793	.23785	.118	-.8593	.1007
		23	-.8353*	.23785	.001	-1.3153	-.3553
	23	15	.4560	.23785	.062	-.0240	.9360
		20	.8353*	.23785	.001	.3553	1.3153

*The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

In order to investigate the difference between fluency scores of two planning groups, i.e., PTP, and OLP, the mean scores of two groups were subjected to an Independent Sample t-test, the results of which are presented in the following tables. The result of Independent Sample t-test for complexity and fluency of PTP and OLP groups in Table 3 demonstrates, the fluency is affected by PTP and OLP conditions. ($t(28) = 7.40$ $P=.00$). With reared to complexity, these two condition has no effect on the complexity of performance. ($t(28) = 1.86$ $P= .072$ $p>.05$).

Table 3.Independent Sample t-test between PTP and OLP groups

Measure	Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Fluency	PTP	6.5740	1.57847	7.407	28	.000
	OLP	3.2767	.69382			
Syntactic complexity	PTP	2.7600	.64977	1.868	28	.072
	OLP	2.3807	.44297			

Table 4 illustrate that PTP and POLP condition have positive effect on fluency of written performance ($t(28) = 2.34$ $P= .027$), but in terms of complexity planning conditions had no significant effect on learner' performance ($t(28) = |1.70|$ $P= .10$ $p>.05$).

Table 4 Independent Sample t-test of PTP and POLP group

Measure	Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Fluency	PTP	6.5740	1.57847	2.342	28	.027
	POLP	5.1880	1.66169			
Syntactic complexity	PTP	2.7600	.64977	-1.702	28	.100
	POLP	3.2160	.80901			

Table 5 demonstrates that PTP and POLP groups have fluent performance ($t(28) = |4.11|$ $P= .00$ $p<.05$). With reared to complexity the difference between groups is significant ($t(28) = |3.50|$ $P= .002$ $P<.05$).so fluency and complexity increased under POLP and PTP conditions.

Table 5 Independent Sample t-test between OLP and POLP group

Measure	Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)
Fluency	PTP	3.2767	.69382	-4.111	28	.000
	POLP	5.1880	1.66169			
Syntactic	PTP	2.3807	.44297	-3.508	28	.002

complexity	POLP	3.2160	80901
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4. Discussion

The first research hypothesis claimed that the pre-task planning (PTP) have no effect on the complexity of writing performance and the results provide confirmation. Skehan (1996) claimed that planning time help learners to search their long term memory before completing the task and attempt vocabulary and syntactic forms that are more complex and varied than what they can fluently use. But in the case of pre-task planning because of time limit there is no space for on-line planning It is safe to argue that pre task planning time gives learners the opportunity to predict what should be included in the completion of the task. The results of this study revealed that when learners are provided with pre -task planning condition they did not produce complex language .This result is contrary to the findings of Mehnert (1998), Ortega(1999) , Yuan and Ellis (2003) who claimed that pre task planning time give learners the opportunity to predict what should be included in the completion of the task on the other hand, finding lends support to the findings of Yuan and Ellis (2004) and Ellis (2005) who concluded that the pre-task planning time cannot lead to the development of syntactic complexity. In the case of OLP group, the result showed that OLP condition had any statistically significant effect for complexity improvement and confirms first hypothesis of this study, which is consistent with findings of Yuan and Ellis (2004) who concluded that on-line planning had some effect on lexical complexity but in the case of syntactic complexity the effect was not statistically significant. It can also be explained by hypothesizing that, on-line planning enable learners to process the message, conceptualize and monitor the utterance before writing. As learners have ample time, they will engage in more covert planning activities than students performing under time pressure. The planning level (POLP) used in this study was innovative in that the planning time was allocated to concomitant pre and on-line task planning. It seems that the POLP planners could remember the content of what they had already planning in the PTP condition and had sufficient amount of time for their writing on-line. POLP had some effect on syntactic complexity. The research findings provide evidence for the statistically significant effect of mixed planning level on the syntactic complexity of learners' writing performance. The findings are consistent with the finding of Yuan and Ellis (2003) who reported that higher degrees of syntactic complexity were with pressured and no time pressure. The result indicates that fluency is affected by PTP condition significantly, which gives more support to findings of Yuan and Ellis (2004), Foster and Skehan (1996). They concluded that pre-task planning aids fluency in writing by facilitating process planning and text planning for content and organization .The findings show that the OLP group was less fluent than the two groups as a result the second hypothesis is proved regarding fluency. The result was consistent with the findings of Yuan and Ellis (2003, 2004), who concluded than encouraging learners to plan on-line does not result in greater fluency. However, it does not appear to inhibit fluency. Writers may take advantage of the time available for on-line planning to monitor their internally processed output during translation before they execute the text. The POLP planning shows significant progress in written text. The finding emerged from this study underscores the benefits of mixed planning condition in enhancing learners' writing performance .PTP condition provide learners time to prepare what they are going to write before text production and OLP condition help them to organize and monitor thoughts. Simultaneous pre and on-line planning assists their fluency and complexity of performance .It was assumes that finding of this study are useful for teachers, teacher trainers to use this method in their classes and textbook writers to organize materials in the context of task- based approaches for writing courses.

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